

“Nova Belém”: the urban expansion and its environmental conflicts

Camila Madeira da Silva Santos¹, Christiane Helen Godinho Costa, Emanuella da Silva Piani Godinho²

^{1,2}Universidade Federal do Pará

¹madeiradeluca@gmail.com

²e.piani@hotmail.com

The urban concentration in slums is a worldwide problem. Characterized by high demographic rates, poor or informal housing, inadequate supply of drinking water and sanitation, and insecurity of residence tenure, urban slums are present in both developed and underdeveloped countries. The structuring of slums often vary according to the environmentally fragile areas prevalent in each location. Corresponding to 78.2% of the urban population of underdeveloped countries (compared to 6% in developed countries), it presents its third largest demographic index in Brazil, with 51.7 million of slum dwellers. The steep cost of urbanized land, combined with the low purchasing power of the population and the lack of affordable housing alternatives in the formal market or the failure of housing policy for the poorest families, are factors that have driven a large mass of the population to occupy areas environmentally fragile and unsuitable for housing. The very logic of production of the built environment and access to land in the city, results in the formation of slums.

In Brazil, the overwhelming majority of households in slum areas are concentrated in metropolitan regions (MRs) with Belém among the three metropolitan areas with the highest slum population of the country. In this city, the physical characteristics of the site determined the structure of its urban space. Mostly, these settlements are located in flooded or seasonally flooded areas, being ordinarily called *baixadas* – lowland in Portuguese, characterized by high density, pile dwelling buildings connected by “estivas” (wooden bridges), precarious urban infrastructure and serious environmental problems, for using waterways as sewage and debris destination. In 2010, more than half of the MR population lived precariously. Belém

has the largest number of households in these conditions, 66%. The downtown area is the one with the best provision of services and infrastructure, being the most valuable as well. “Favelas” have become the reality in Brazil and worldwide, but the *baixadas* from Belém exhibit a peculiar case because are the junction between the "concrete city" and the *Ribeirinhos*¹ traditional techniques in a wide intensely dense space.

From this perspective of slum formation and specific cases in environmentally fragile areas, this study aims to address the structuring of a recently called area of "Nova Belém" (“The New Belém”) situated in the expansion area of the state capital. Structured from the Augusto Montenegro avenue, this area is suffering an accelerated urbanization process, due to the real estate valuation since 2005, when there is a merger between the financial and real estate capital, which incorporates the national real estate circuit. Although, focus is more extensively from the year 2009, boosted by the housing program “Minha Casa Minha Vida” (MCMV) from the Federal Government. By the end of the last century, slums and large green masses occupied the area in question, predominantly. As it is located in the intercity axis connecting between the urban district of Belém and Icoaraci, it was target for years of a spontaneous occupation, but still had many empty land plots subject to speculation.

With the real estate "boom" that occurred a decade ago, numerous housing developments spread across the axis of Av. Augusto Montenegro, causing conflicts with the illegal occupation existing on site. This capitalist phenomenon of urban occupation, secured the interest of the elites who took up residence in the most valued areas with infrastructure, while that directed the people of low income to poor infrastructure areas without sanitation and exposure to environmental risks. The area received a boost in their occupation by the federal government policies aimed at expanding housing finance by encouraging the construction of residential projects for the population as well as real estate, trade and services. Thus, large enterprises have

¹ “Ribeirinhos” is the name given to the traditional people that inhabit the riverbanks, in wooden houses supported on stilts over the river itself, and practice artisanal fishing. Commonly found in Amazon, this population often, in some cases, works with the cultivation and periodic extraction, whereas cultivation is varied and the local economy works of season's product sales.

moved to the borders of the avenue, consolidating a new city center. This new pattern of land use, encouraged by the real estate capital has been promoting the development of this area, making it an investment target in urban services.

The old periphery and region of the largest areas of informal occupation of the city was named "Nova Belém" ("The New Belém") advertising slogan widely used, associated with the projects launched in the region. The incentive for the establishment of trade and services at the Augusto Montenegro venue is associated to the need of the private sector together with the government aimed at ensuring an effective demand for projects that have been launched in the area, ensuring the development of the city's expansion area. Thus, part of the population installed in informal housing has been relocated for the construction of new projects. The non-capitalist modes of production and forms of social organization are gradually replaced by the market for not meeting the profit dynamics of capital that appropriates areas, taking advantage of the relative state failure and low mobilization capacity of low-income populations located in these regions. This inequality is caused by multiple undemocratic processes of development and policy implementation through discriminatory rules that produce disproportionate impact on different social groups. We intend here to discuss the existing precarious situation on the site from the space formation mechanisms in the light of the environmental justice concept.